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Texans Seem Uncertain Over Central America

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AUSTIN, Tex., April 27 — A television commercial for Bob Krueger, a candidate for the Democratic senatorial nomination, shows a voter musing over his choices. An off-camera voice says Mr. Krueger was once ambassador at large for Mexican affairs and is an expert on Latin America.

"That's important, real important," says the voice, as the voter marks his ballot for Mr. Krueger.

The issue of Central America, of the Administration's handling of the matter, is starting to bubble to the surface in Texas as the May 5 primary election approaches. The territory south of the Rio Grande is still a distant and murky place to many voters, but the Krueger campaign operates on the conviction that public concern is growing.

"It's an edge-of-the-plate issue now," said George Shipley, Mr. Krueger's poll taker here in the state capital. "But it's on the plate."

Clearer Lines Expected

Moreover, Mr. Shipley believes that Central America will continue to grow in importance, as the lines between Democratic and Republican candidates become more clearly drawn.

"President Reagan will certainly be called upon to defend his policies in the state of Texas," he said. "I really do believe that Democrats and Republicans are not going to support interventionist policies for too long. There's a time fuse on this thing, and it's not only the money, it's the lack of results. The President may be mining more harbors than Nicaragua. He may be mining his own."

Texas is not a typical state in which to assess the impact of the Central America issue, for it shares a long border with Mexico and close economic and cultural ties with the entire region. But the mood here described by Mr. Shipley mirrors the findings of the latest New York Times/CBS poll.

Forty-three percent disapproved of Mr. Reagan's handling of Central America, as opposed to 30 percent who approved. Moreover, almost half the electorate expressed fears that the President might drag the United States into war in that region.

Financing Blocked in Congress

This finding has important legislative as well as political implications. Congress will soon resume debate on a bill allocating \$62 million in military aid for El Salvador and \$21 million for rebels fighting the Government of Nicaragua. House Democrats blocked the measure before the Easter recess, and Mr. Reagan has voiced hope that public pressure will dislodge the funds.

Moreover, reports that the Central Intelligence Agency directed mining of Nicaraguan harbors have raised the question of how closely Congress can or should monitor the agency's secret operations.

Many voters in Texas seem troubled about the Central America issue. In dozens of interviews here last week, probably the most common view expressed was ambivalence. While many Texans seem reluctant to spend much United States money or any lives to counteract leftist insurgencies in the region, few want to see any more countries fall under Communist control.

"I kind of vacillate between thinking we're involved too much and involved not enough," said Sandy Simpkins, a lawyer in Waco. "Then I don't know what to think. I've worried that we've never really gotten the straight line from anybody, and I'm afraid we'll get drawn into something. It's so difficult to know who is the good guy."

The Bad Versus the Bad

"If we were responsible for the mining of the harbors, that sounds like an extreme move," said Kip Antene, a salesman who supports Mr. Reagan. "On the other hand, Nicaragua is in the hands of extremists, and maybe that's the only thing they understand. It sure

looks like we're supporting a bad group of people against another bad group of people."

Because so many voters, and their representatives in Congress, are uncertain about American involvement in the region, many of the Reagan Administration's proposals for increased aid have been trimmed or sidetracked. But these Administration efforts remind some voters of the way the United States became enmeshed in Southeast Asia.

"We should either get it done or get out; we shouldn't go in halfway," said Ray Lesko, a data processor for an insurance company.

"No more Vietnams," added his wife, Kay, a computer programmer.

"It's one of those things where you're damned if you do and damned if you don't," said Red Edmonds, a feed salesman. "It's like swatting a wasp's nest with a toothpick. The odds are pretty good you'll get stung."

At the same time, Mr. Reagan's determination to oppose Communist expansionism in Central America has garnered strong support among many voters here, who feel a renewed pride in their country and in their President.

"Lebanon was too far from home, but this is like someone fighting in your own backyard," said Eliseo Cotto Jr., who sells plumbing supplies. "Reagan's shown that we can't be pushed around. I was always proud of the fact that we were the strongest nation on earth, and when Carter was President that kind of went to pot."

"I wish we could walk away," said Bob Stokes, an insurance broker and part-time minister. "But could we stick our head in the sand and let the Communists take over?"

Given these conflicting signals, many politicians from Texas are uncertain how to approach the question of increased aid. Representative Charles W. Stenholm, a conservative Democrat from West Texas, says his constituents do not like foreign aid or the mining of the Nicaraguan harbors.

"But you'd hate to vote against the aid and have another country fall," he said. "That's the bottom line. It's not an easy vote."